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I

Obscured Order, Human Frailty and the Liberal Tradition

There seems to be almost a consensus in theological circles concerning the nature of the problem with 'liberalism'.¹ Liberalism, according to this conception, is based upon an illusory human subject who constructs order and denies transcendence. The 'liberal' focuses on the will at the cost of attending to reason or order. This focus on the will engenders a fetish for freedom of choice and the removal of all impediments to human liberty; consequently, the notion of 'freedom/liberty' is emptied of any substantial historical, traditional or philosophical content. Flowing from this entirely stripped-down notion of freedom, liberalism has a voluntaristic account of values and meaning, with 'ethics' being a construction by the subject. This voluntarist meta-ethic fosters a destructive individualism and social atomism. In an attempt to distract from the poverty of the liberal conception of freedom, liberals tend to support a pseudo-Messianic/Pelagian progressivism about history, often finding expression in a fixation with technology and economic growth. After relating this narrative, theology is called upon to judge this liberalism as a false and historically contingent religion masquerading as a secular, timeless and neutral framework. Although sometimes able to say a tentative 'yes' to some aspects of liberalism, there is usually also a trenchant call for the Church to stand as a counter-culture to the corrupt pseudo-religion of man which liberalism has become; 'modernity as Antichrist, a parodic and corrupt development of Christian social order',² as Oliver O'Donovan sternly phrases it.

The Radical Orthodoxy movement, which I treat extensively in

¹ A version of this chapter was presented at a conference organized by Heythrop College University of London, 'The Hidden City: a Theological Reflection on the Polis', held at Trinity College, Oxford, in September 2003.

² Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 275.

Chapter 4, clearly flags its contempt of political liberalism. So John Milbank, in his recent *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, comments that 'political liberalism itself engenders today an increasingly joyless and puritanical world' marked by a 'totalitarian drift . . . its [political liberalism's] empty heart . . . besieged by an irrational cult of race, science, style or belief'.³ We find a more measured but not entirely dissimilar critique in Robert Song's *Christianity and Liberal Society*. Song's fine study is superior to many theological treatments of liberalism in that it does at least deny the possibility of a 'univocal definition of such an historically and conceptually complex phenomenon'⁴ as liberalism. Nevertheless, Song identifies a 'pattern of characteristic family resemblances', of which the 'most central' are 'a voluntaristic conception of the human subject; a constructivist meta-ethics; an abstract, universalist, and individualistic mode of thought; and a broadly progressivist philosophy of history'.⁵

Song speaks of the 'political Messianism' of the 'doctrines of historical progress and implicit Pelagian theologies' behind liberalism,⁶ which doctrines are now manifested in 'late twentieth-century dependencies on economic growth and technological progress'.⁷ After identifying the centrality of the will, the loss of transcendence and the neglect of human limitations as defining features of this political Messianism,⁸ Song states that 'theology must finally interpret politics, and not vice-versa',⁹ with a special role for the Church to make 'declarations of moral truth in the public realm' being 'formed by a language which the world does not share'.¹⁰ Although the Church can offer a tentative 'Yes' to some features of liberal society, in 'so far as it offers opportunities for contributing to social order less unjust than the alternatives',¹¹ nevertheless the Church with its 'orientation to eternity'¹² is there to 'signify the eschatological

³ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 25.

⁴ Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 9.

⁵ Song, *Christianity*, p. 9.

⁶ Song, *Christianity*, p. 214.

⁷ Song, *Christianity*, p. 214.

⁸ Song, *Christianity*, pp. 216–20.

⁹ Song, *Christianity*, p. 225.

¹⁰ Song, *Christianity*, p. 231.

¹¹ Song, *Christianity*, p. 233.

¹² Song, *Christianity*, p. 231.

Kingdom',¹³ and to register its 'No' to liberalism in so far as it is 'subservient to technology and oriented to historical utopianism'.¹⁴

O'Donovan identifies the 'series of self-interpreting doctrines' of liberalism 'which define metaphysical parameters for thought and action (even while innocently disavowing metaphysical intentions)'.¹⁵ Liberalism emerges as a 'false posture of transcendence, an illusion that society may be organised on formal principles from the perspective of a "view from nowhere" (Nagel)'.¹⁶ At the centre of the liberal moment is 'the notion of the abstract will, exercising choice prior to all reason and order, from whose *fiat lux* spring society, morality and rationality itself'.¹⁷ Corresponding to this transcendent will who constructs meaning is 'an inert nature, lacking any given order that could make it good prior to the imposition of human purposes upon it'.¹⁸ Drawing out the deep theological commitments of this position O'Donovan writes that 'the paradigm for the human presence in the world is creation *ex nihilo*, the absolute summoning of reason, order and beauty out of chaos and emptiness. This does not, of course, honour God's creative deed, but competes with it'.¹⁹

Such a critique of liberalism has venerable philosophical and theological roots. Heidegger's essay 'Die Frage nach der Technik' ('The Question of Technology')²⁰ identifies technology not as technical innovation but as an approach to practical reasoning that treats reason as an instrument which manipulates – to its own pre-conceived ends – the raw material around it. Such an ordering of reason to *technē* is understood by Heidegger to be behind humanism and liberalism,²¹ binding it in the same ontological genealogy to Communism and Fascism. This binding is one which O'Donovan and Song are both happy to re-enact, with Song finding a 'similarity

¹³ Song, *Christianity*, p. 231.

¹⁴ Song, *Christianity*, p. 232.

¹⁵ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 274.

¹⁶ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 274.

¹⁷ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 274.

¹⁸ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 274.

¹⁹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 274.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology' in trans. W. Lovitt, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1952–62) (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

²¹ See Martin Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' in *Pathmarks*, (ed.) W. McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

between liberal and national socialist rhetorics',²² and O'Donovan drawing the more generalized and cautious parallel between liberalism and political structures that offer themselves as the 'sufficient and necessary condition of human welfare', and which as such are 'totalitarian'.²³ Bolstering the anti-liberal theological consensus we can perhaps also hear Karl Barth's characterization of the Enlightenment as the time of 'absolute man'. Barth's 'absolute man' is substantially the same as the 'liberal man' of theological consensus:

Man, who discovers his own power and ability, the potentiality dormant in his humanity, that is, his human being as such, and looks upon it as the final, the real and absolute, I mean as something 'detached', self-justifying, with its own authority and power, which he can therefore set in motion in all directions and without any restraint – this man is absolute man.²⁴

These theologians are not wrong about liberalism. There are certainly strands of liberalism which fit this characterization. Song, for instance, does a careful and effective job of showing these strands running through five liberal thinkers: Locke, Kant, Mill, Hobhouse and Hayek. Although not wrong about liberalism, Song, O'Donovan, Barth and their lesser imitators are not right about it either. Consider Song's 'family resemblance' description of liberalism, which is an entirely characteristic conception in the anti-liberal theological literature. Such liberalism is marked out, we remember, by: '... a voluntaristic conception of the human subject; a constructivist meta-ethics; an abstract, universalist, and individualistic mode

²² Song, *Christianity*, p. 213. Based on Dr Goebbels' saying: 'You are at liberty to seek your salvation as you understand it, provided you do nothing to change the social order.' It is well known that totalitarian regimes commandeer the language of freedom; I would suggest that it should not be taken at face value that this reflects a deep conceptual fault line in liberalism, rather than a *kitsch* appropriation by totalitarians of antithetical principles.

²³ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 274.

²⁴ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. B. Cozens (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 36. *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19 Jahrhundert* (Zollikon/Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag AG, 1952): 'Der Mensch, der seine eigene Kraft, sein Können, die in seiner Humanität, d.h. in seinem Menschein also solchem schlummerrule Potentialität entdeckt, der sie als Letzten, Eigentliches, Absolutes, will sagen: als ein Gelöstes, in sich selbst Berechtigtes und Bevollmächtigtes und Mächtiges versteht, der sie darum hemmungslos nach allen Seiten in Gang setzt, dieser Mensch ist der absolutische Mensch', p. 18.

of thought; and a broadly progressivist philosophy of history'.²⁵ The problem with this characterization is that it could have been delivered – almost point by point and *on the basis of his political liberalism* – by Edmund Burke as a summary of all that is wrong with projects and enthusiasms such as the French Revolution. The claim developed in this chapter is that proper attention to a figure such as Burke can challenge the anti-liberal consensus, indicating deep lines of theological compatibility between some aspects of political liberalism and the Christian tradition. Although the focus in this chapter will be on Burke – and to a lesser extent Lord Acton – the ramifications are much wider. By documenting a 'hidden' strand of political liberalism, theologians might be brought to think more generously about the possibilities and aspirations of political liberalism, as well as declaring its manifest failings, historical debasement and concrete problems. Christian theologians legitimately complain when 'Christianity' is judged by its worst historical and concrete moments, and ask for its higher aspirations and deepest truths to be reckoned with; we might do well to extend this courtesy to other traditions, such as political liberalism.

The term 'liberalism' was not used as a term in political contexts until the 1820s.²⁶ Considerable caution is required in 'back-projecting' the term to earlier periods. Nonetheless, a certain amount of 'back-projection' is legitimate if the term 'political liberalism' is used in a specified way to pick out themes that are unarguably part of political liberalism as we understand it, which themes are demonstrably developed in thinkers prior to 1820. So to be quite specific, by 'political liberalism' I mean the conviction that politics is ordered towards peaceful coexistence (the absence of conflict), and the preservation of the liberties of the individual within a pluralistic and tolerant framework, rather than by a search for truth (religious or otherwise), perfection and unity. The crucial ambition of this sort of 'political liberalism' is a refusal to allow public power to enforce on society a substantial and comprehensive conception of the good; driven as it is by its central passion for the liberties of individuals over and above the enthusiasms of other individuals or collectivities. Political authority is wielded on behalf of the people it protects, and is derived ultimately from their consent.

²⁵ Song, *Christianity*, p. 9.

²⁶ I am grateful to Matthew Grimley for drawing my attention to this.

Burke (1729–97), inasmuch as he endorses each of these features of political liberalism, represents a ‘politically liberal’ position. Striking for our purposes here, Burke defends these politically liberal elements whilst critiquing everything to which anti-liberal theologians are allergic: the voluntaristic, abstract, formal, universalizing, self-transcendent will who constructs all order, meaning and beauty. This ‘liberal’ (from now on I will drop the scare marks, with the understanding that I mean by ‘liberalism’ the specified elements outlined above) tradition is driven by a sense of the frailty and limitations of individuals and a sense of the difficulty and dangers of discerning and imposing order given our fallen and complex condition.

There is something ironic about the charge that liberalism has ‘become’ a pseudo-religion, that it has – in Song’s words – ‘take[n] on Messianic form, in its philosophy of history and tendency to progressivism’.²⁷ As will become clear in my discussion of ‘crusading liberalism’ (Chapter 3), this progressivist and eschatologically ambitious liberalism is entirely the child of certain theological presuppositions. There is no need for theology to intervene or come in judgement, or for liberal society to be ‘sacralized’ (Song);²⁸ there is already too much theology of too specific a nature directly behind some of the most objectionable features of crusading liberalism. These features spring from an attempt to separate in history the saints from the damned, and to purify the visible historical institution of the Church so that it becomes, through human activism, the eschatological gathering in glory of all the saints. The visible Church was to be transformed into the invisible (the impure into the pure) by the regeneration of the saints. Once this regeneration was complete, the saints could take their activist part in inaugurating the Kingdom by the confident identification and elimination of evil.

There is perhaps a trace – no more than this, and subject to qualification given below – of something depressingly familiar in the way the Church is invoked by O’Donovan and Song. It has echoes at least of the pure, transforming, politically activist Church of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century radical Protestants, who we will see are behind some of the most depressing features of modern triumphalist liberalism. There is an intimation of the same movement of thought. The Church is pure, the world (liberalism) impure;

²⁷ Song, *Christianity*, p. 229.

²⁸ Song, *Christianity*, p. 229.

through salvation of its members the Church is then called to prophetic action and judgement of the world and the elimination of evil, leading to the inauguration of the Kingdom on earth. So Song writes of the 'Church as the unique eschatological sign of the coming Kingdom . . . that which, by its existence, defines the world as world, and by its life, shows to the world its worldly nature . . . a living demonstration of the relativity and transient nature of politics'.²⁹ O'Donovan tells us that the church is the 'only . . . society which is incorporated into the Kingdom of God and which recapitulates the narrative of the Christ event'.³⁰

Is this the visible or the invisible Church? If the visible, *where* is the Church which is not – for all its glories – like every human institution bogged down in conflict, complacency, corruption, mediocrity and self-deception? Sometimes it seems that 'the Church' being spoken of is not tainted, fallen and complex in the same way as all human institutions, but that the visible Church has already been transformed into the invisible, and needs to maintain purity of witness and action before a world cast in darkness. It is not confidence in human activism and voluntarism *per se* that seems to be problematized, but human activism and voluntarism outside of the Church. How else can we make sense of the rather odd feature of Oliver O'Donovan's magnificent *Desire of the Nations*, that after a sustained scholarly polemic against the notion of voluntarism and the will, we are brought in the ultimate paragraph before a 'moment of *decision*', between the 'two loves which made the two cities',³¹ as if – after all – human decision-making is the key.

Limited theological appreciation of liberalism

With these reservations emphatically made, it is nevertheless important to record that the theological treatments of liberalism presented by O'Donovan and Song are more subtle and nuanced than some of the passages quoted above would suggest. We have already seen how Song's 'family resemblance' account of liberalism avoids the fruitless drawing-up of necessary and sufficient conditions for liberalism, and so avoids a crude caricature. Song's approach is valuable, for

²⁹ Song, *Christianity*, p. 229.

³⁰ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 251.

³¹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 284.

instance, in being able to distinguish constitutional liberalism (Locke and Kant), 'rooted in opposition to arbitrary, personal, or unlimited power', *laissez-faire* liberalism (Hayek) emphasizing 'freedom of trade internationally and minimal government domestically' and welfare/revisionist liberalism (Hobhouse) stressing 'the importance of social justice and equitable material distribution' within a framework 'which guarantees civil liberties and the rights of the individual'.³² Such a differentiation of the liberal tradition is invaluable in that it helps Song to see how one can criticize one form of liberalism on the basis of another. So, for instance, in his discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr, Song notes how Niebuhr's critical attitude to certain strands of liberalism was only possible because he was a 'chastened welfare liberal with a strong commitment to liberal constitutionalism'.³³

Song's subtlety about liberalism comes out at another point in his discussion of Niebuhr. Niebuhr draws a connection between what he understands to be the optimistic, liberal view of man and progressivist notions of history and Pelagianism, writing for instance that the 'belief that man could solve his problem . . . by the historical process itself is a mistake which is partly prompted by the most universal of all "ideological" taints: the pride, not of particular men and cultures, but of man as man'.³⁴ Song's entirely apposite comment here is that Niebuhr 'sometimes talked of liberalism when properly he meant optimism . . . clearly regarding the former as a species of the latter'.³⁵ Song correctly points out that 'not all liberals have been naive progressivists'.³⁶ Even where some notion of progress is in play, it need not have the perfectibilist implausibility that Niebuhr claims. So Kant hoped for perpetual peace and the unity of mankind, 'but was relatively pessimistic about human perfectibility';³⁷ Mill was dispositionally a perfectibilist ('the general tendency is . . . a tendency towards a better and happier state'³⁸), but as Song points out, Mill

³² Song, *Christianity*, pp. 38–9.

³³ Song, *Christianity*, p. 50.

³⁴ Song, *Christianity*, p. 64. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (London: Nisbet, 1943), ii, 331.

³⁵ Song, *Christianity*, p. 71.

³⁶ Song, *Christianity*, p. 71.

³⁷ Song, *Christianity*, p. 72.

³⁸ *Ibid.* The Mill reference is, 'A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive', in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (London: Routledge, 1974), Vol. vi, p. 3.

also feared the coming of democracy, and 'hardly owned to a massive historical idealism'.³⁹

O'Donovan's strictures against liberalism are counter-balanced with his acknowledgement that 'the liberal tradition . . . has right of possession . . . we cannot simply go behind it; it has the status of a church tradition, and demands to be treated with respect'.⁴⁰ O'Donovan, like Song, has a rich appreciation of the different strands that make up modernity:

As it has gained in sophistication, modernity-criticism has shown more clearly the multiplicity of threads from which the fabric is woven, and so has allowed us to think of other liberalisms, different possibilities of combination and development from those which have woven our contemporary bondage. By way of this closer view of the weaving of modernity, we are free to discern both the triumph of Christ in liberal institutions and the coming of the Antichrist.⁴¹

It is precisely this 'closer view of the weaving of modernity' which I am engaged upon in this book, and I attach myself emphatically to O'Donovan's observation that 'the liberal tradition is not homogeneous or unchanging, and its central Christian witness does not always lie on the surface'.⁴² O'Donovan's most severe judgements, the outline of which I gave above, are reserved more for 'late-modern' liberalism, with its confidence in the human will, constructivism and technology. O'Donovan provides a more mixed report for the 'early modern liberalism' of Locke, Hobbes and Kant, 'a composite of rationalist, romantic and sceptical influences as well as Christian, some of them tending to subvert, some to strengthen the Christian contribution'.⁴³ Early modern liberalism has the watermark of Christendom running through it.

There are at least three areas in which O'Donovan perceives the legacy of Christendom in early modern liberalism: the responsibility of rulers; the rule of law and tolerance. On the first motif O'Donovan comments that 'the political doctrine that emerged from

³⁹ Song, *Christianity*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 229.

⁴¹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 228.

⁴² O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 229.

⁴³ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 229.

Christendom is characterised by a notion that government is responsible'.⁴⁴ Because of the division between the two Kingdoms, the lack of identification between the two Cities, 'rulers, overcome by Christ's victory, exist provisionally and on sufferance for specific purposes. In the church they have to confront a society which witnesses to the Kingdom under which they stand and before which they must disappear. It is to that conception we refer when we describe political authority in terms of "the state".' This was a concept unknown to the ancient world, describing something new, 'a form of political authority which has come to understand itself differently as a result of Christ's triumph'.⁴⁵ The notion that rulers are provisional and on sufferance for specific purposes – vehicles of an authority which is not intrinsic to them – is broadly what makes possible the liberal conception of power invested in government: provisional, instrumental, answerable. Furthermore, the influence of Christendom is to be discerned in the liberal emphasis on law. Under Christendom the 'state exists in order to give judgement; but under the authority of Christ's rule it gives judgement *under law*, never as its own law. One might say that the only sense of political authority acknowledged within Christendom was the law of the ascended Christ, and that all political authority was the authority of that law.'⁴⁶

A third 'Christian' feature of early modern liberalism discussed by O'Donovan – tolerance – owes less to Christendom than a certain Protestant understanding of the relationship between an individual's faith and reason. So for early liberals

the dialectical struggle of rational debate, in which each side marshals arguments to bring the other to agreement, seemed . . . a healthy thing, the proper alternative to violent struggle. In an argument which had currency from Milton to Mill, they pleaded for the toleration of erroneous beliefs precisely on the ground that they stimulated rational discussion and so assisted the common quest for truth without approving the hope that common persuasions may emerge from it. They thought there was nothing to fear from shared convictions if they were rationally reached and rationally held.⁴⁷

This theological resonance of early modern liberalism has been

⁴⁴ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 231.

⁴⁵ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 231.

⁴⁶ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 233.

⁴⁷ O'Donovan, *Desire*, p. 221.

of interest to David Fergusson also, whose work is exemplary for a subtle appreciation of the strengths of liberalism. So Fergusson outlines the theological case for tolerance in the early modern period as being 'based on a cluster of related arguments – the example of Christ and the early church, the limits of state power, the irrationality of coercion, the sanctity of each person's faith commitment, the need for peace and social cohesion, and the promotion of conversation and debate amongst those who differ for the sake of a greater approximation to God's truth'.⁴⁸ The truth of Fergusson's claim about the theological origins of 'liberal' toleration can be shown strictly and biographically by looking at Locke's *Four Letters on Toleration*,⁴⁹ where we find Locke stating that 'the toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion, is so agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to the genuine reason of mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind, as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it, in so clear a light'.⁵⁰ The theological non-intervention of the state, and the tolerance of religious diversity, are absolutely necessary given the nature of faith as autonomous, reasoned and individual:

All the life and power of true religion consists in the outward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing. Whatever profession we make, to whatever outward worship we conform, if we are not fully satisfied in our own mind that the one is true, and the other well pleasing unto God, such profession and such practice, far from being any furtherance, are indeed great obstacles to our salvation. For in this manner, instead of expiating other sins by the exercise of religion, I say, in offering thus unto God Almighty such a worship as we esteem to be displeasing unto him, we add unto the number of our other sins, those also of hypocrisy, and contempt of his Divine Majesty.⁵¹

Fergusson draws contemporary lessons from this theological lineage, that 'these arguments' concerning the relationship between non-coercion, tolerance and faith, 'retain their validity even if more

⁴⁸ David Fergusson, 'The Reformed Tradition and the Virtue of Tolerance', in *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, ed. William Storrar and Andrew Morton (London: T. & T. Clark International, forthcoming 2004). See also *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁹ John Locke, *Four Letters on Toleration* (London: Ward, Lock, 1899).

⁵⁰ Locke, *Toleration*, p. 5.

⁵¹ Locke, *Toleration*, p. 6.

modern claims for autonomy are found increasingly suspect. At a time when liberalism is under attack, we may need to be reminded of the preceding theological case of toleration.⁵²

Attending to the best contemporary theological treatments of political liberalism – as found in Oliver O'Donovan, Robert Song and David Fergusson – we may be able to discern a new wind, more favourable to liberalism than the likes of Heidegger and Karl Barth. Any enthusiasm for liberalism is muted, reserved, partial and specifically theological, tending to focus on earlier strands of the liberal tradition which are seen to preserve something of their Christian inheritance: the responsibility of rulers, the rule of law and the importance of toleration and freedom of conscience as a necessary but not sufficient pre-condition for faith and salvation. There is, as we have seen, a sense that as time moves on the theological impulses behind liberalism get watered down and corrupted with more dubious preoccupations. The concern of critics such as Song and O'Donovan is that the responsibility of rulers becomes reduced to their instrumental and unprincipled slavery to the ballot box and the stock market. The rule of law is no longer subservient to Christ, but is conceived within a framework where the conventional and constructed nature of order and truth is taken for granted. Tolerance becomes either an indifferent relativism, or itself a paradoxically intolerant ideology which makes impossible more 'coercive' forms of life and traditional communities. But nonetheless, there is an appreciation of the impossibility of simply leaping over liberalism, and the stirrings of an appreciation of its complex conceptual, historical and theological motivations.

I conceive the thesis being argued for here as is in some ways attached to, and in sympathy with, this more considered re-appreciation of aspects of liberalism. Where I would depart significantly from the contemporary literature is in a conviction that it has not in several respects gone far enough. First of all, there is almost no attempt to face with repentance and self-reflexiveness the fairly direct theological responsibility which the Christian tradition has for some of the worst features of crusading liberalism. This narrative, traced especially in Chapter 3, shows that the most divisive, activist and intolerant strands of liberalism arise historically from a too close identification of the visible and invisible Church, and a subsequent anthropology which verges on the perfectibilist and Manichean.

⁵² Fergusson, 'Reformed Tradition', p. 11.

Theological accounts of liberalism can be very keen to take responsibility for the prettier aspects of liberalism (the responsibility of rulers and freedom of conscience), with the less attractive aspects being ascribed to liberalism's falling away from whatever Christian origins it may have had. On the other hand, there is some reluctance to perceive that the 'pseudo-Messianism' which can be found in liberal progressivist views of history has not *become* superficially attached through a kitsch secular appropriation of theological themes, but was in fact a generating and theological principle of this 'liberal' movement, which can drop the explicit theological reference and then appropriate more 'secular' themes (such as technology or global free-markets).

The second respect in which I would claim that the contemporary re-evaluation of liberalism does not go far enough, is that it fails to see that there is a healthy strand of liberalism – running through the early modern period and still alive in the present day – which is informed by, or at the very least powerfully compatible with, a theological tradition of reckoning with our status as creatures. Even the most appreciative approaches that we have considered are wedded to a characterization of liberalism as voluntaristic, constructivist and broadly progressivist. This critique remains in place, even where some credit is given to liberalism for its emphasis on non-coercive faith, or the de-sacralization of power. So liberalism is held to be 'voluntaristic', in that the individual is conceived as the fundamental ontological unit. The individual, so conceived, is abstracted from contingency, context and history, failing to acknowledge our thrown-projection, our embodiment, or in a more theological key, our createdness. It is 'constructivist' in that all order and value are constructed by the subject, either individually or collectively. It is 'progressivist' in that – even if in a broad and complicated way – history is moving towards a better organization of society and fulfilment of human potential, with liberalism being instrumentally necessary for this progress. This characterization of liberalism is sometimes described as an aspect of the 'modern turn', given powerful philosophical expression by thinkers such as Heidegger and Leo Strauss. In spite of more nuanced appreciations of the virtues of 'early-modern' liberalism, the sense that liberalism belongs on the wrong side of this turn seems always to remain. Where there is divergence, it concerns what we can hope to do about this 'modern turn', of which political liberalism is a symptom, ranging from the 'participatory universe' of Radical Orthodoxy, through to the evangelical-

prophetic, eschatological Church uttering its considered 'yes' and 'no' to liberalism.

This characterization of liberalism needs to be challenged. I will present a strand of liberal political thought, focusing in this chapter on Edmund Burke and to a lesser extent Lord Acton, which is in crucial respects anti-voluntaristic, anti-constructivist and anti-progressivist; in short, a strand of liberalism opposed to all those features that are supposed – even on the most generous interpretation – to belong to liberalism, as liberalism in turn belongs to the 'modern turn'. We will find that where the individual is conceived as the basic ontological unit, this is entirely because of a sense of the frailty and createdness of individuals. In these thinkers there is a powerful sense of given and created order, along with a caution which arises from an equally urgent sense of the importance and difficulty of fallen humans reading this order. Will and construction are always balanced by an integrated account of reason, tradition and order. Burkean liberalism is rooted in an Augustinian sense of the complexity and fallenness of history, with no whiff of progressivism or Pelagianism. In showing this tradition of liberalism, I will be challenging the pervasive 'fits all' hermeneutic value of the 'modern turn', and arguing for a much more theologically resounding endorsement of specific liberal movements of thought.

It will also be necessary to show that this theologically subtle and informed liberal tradition did not exhaust itself – as O'Donovan suggests – in an 'early modern period' leading to a monopoly of a much more pernicious voluntaristic liberalism. I argue against this theological narrative by attending in the next chapter to John Rawls, and the debate generated by Rawls. I will suggest that a proper consideration of Rawls shows that there are places where the finest ideals of political liberalism are as alive today as they ever have been. The theological narrative that liberalism has 'fallen' from an early modern state of grace is likely to be as historically unfounded as the inverse Whig narrative of progress. To judge the demise of political liberalism by its worst debasements – hawkish American administrations, corrupt global corporations and popular TV shows – is to invite a similarly ungenerous and unscholarly announcement of the fall of 'Christianity' (in its entirety) on the basis of its worst debasements, for instance, sectarian terrorism, white supremacist groups who appropriate Christian vocabulary, and slick television evangelists.

Edmund Burke and obscured order

My discussion of Burke will move through four stages. First of all, I will demonstrate the unequivocal sense in which Burke is a liberal in the specified sense, accounting at the same time for his trenchant anti-democratic stance, and his apparent inegalitarianism. Second, I will demonstrate Burke's commitment to the notion of created order and harmony; at this point I will suggest that the 'modern turn' posited in politics by Leo Strauss would seem not to pertain in crucial respects to Burkean liberalism. This is no insignificant conclusion, as it indicates that there can be non-voluntaristic and non-constructivist insights within the liberal tradition, and so that the hermeneutic value of speaking in blanket terms of the 'modern turn' is too crude and alarmist. The third phase of the discussion shows how Burke has a profound and compassionate sense of human imperfectibility, frailty and complexity, which lends his political thought an allergy to abstraction, metaphysical generalization, extremism and progressivism. We will see how this sense of human imperfectibility is a generating motivation for Burke's liberalism and individualism; although there is unconstructed order and harmony, it is hard – but not impossible – to read it, owing to the obscured quality of the order. Finally, I show how this draws together to produce Burke's spirit of loving reformation: an active and principled commitment to resist abuses of power, but within a framework of constant caution about human nature and action. The City of God is hidden amid the City of Man: attempts to render the heavenly city visible or construct it on earth through human activity, Burke fears, are steeped in blood, the product of a hubristic metaphysical frenzy leading to vast human misery.

Burke's liberalism and Lord Acton

For Burke the centrality of 'liberty' and its inherent relationship to given order is made clear in his *Appeal from the Old to the New Whigs*, where he writes that 'the *distinguishing* part of our constitution . . . is its liberty':

To preserve that liberty inviolate, is the *peculiar* duty and *proper* trust of a member of the House of Commons. But the liberty, the *only* liberty I mean, is a liberty connected with *order*, and that not

only exists *with* order and virtue, but cannot exist at all *without* them. It inheres in good and steady government, as in *its substance and vital principle*.⁵³

Burke's attachment to ordered, rational liberty preserved within historical constitutions makes him hostile to what he understands to be the vacuous formulaic calls for liberty heard in the French Revolution. At the same time, it makes him supportive of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the American move to independence: both were, as he understood them, in some sense attempts to protect ancient liberties enjoyed by English subjects from innovation and tyranny imposed by the Government. So Burke appeals to British colonists in North America as fellow 'men of liberal minds',⁵⁴ who enjoy the 'large and liberal platform of common liberty'⁵⁵ which unites the Americans and the 'largest and soundest' part of 'this kingdom' (England), where originated the 'very liberty which you (the Americans) so justly prize'.⁵⁶ The Americans were increasingly unhappy with insensitive colonial rule, featuring oppressive taxation without consent or representation. Burke concedes that the behaviour of the English administration has been so bad that even a revolution and subsequent 'series of wars and contentions amongst yourselves . . . might be worth the risk to men of honour, when rational liberty is at stake'.⁵⁷ The revolutionaries, provoked by an illiberal British administration, '*have and . . . hold* to that foundation of common liberty' and as such are 'the only true Englishmen', with the English administration of Lord North and others being 'corrupted in blood, and wholly fallen from their original rank and value' being the 'real rebels to the fair constitution and just supremacy of England'.⁵⁸

Already we see that Burke's position is subtle enough to support reform of a significant kind – to the point of revolution – and is far from being a eulogy to the powers that be, with it being possible to castigate British prime ministers as 'rebels' when they threaten the

⁵³ Edmund Burke, 'Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', in *The Works and Correspondence of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, Vol. iv (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1852), p. 417.

⁵⁴ Edmund Burke, 'An Address to the British Colonists in North America', in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. v, p. 544.

⁵⁵ Burke, 'Address', p. 540.

⁵⁶ Burke, 'Address', p. 544.

⁵⁷ Burke, 'Address', p. 544.

⁵⁸ Burke, 'Address', pp. 543–4.

common liberties of the subject. The popular image of Burke – as a Tory defender of an oppressive status quo – can be an impediment to serious consideration of his stature and thought, and a little background here may be helpful. In fact Burke was a Whig and spent most of his active political life opposing the Tories, and in his own words in ‘constant attempts to reform abuses in government’.⁵⁹ Burke may have in mind his piloting of the Catholic Relief Act through the Commons in 1778; his spirited attacks on the oppressive taxation enforced by the American Stamp Act and the Massachusetts Bay Regulation Bill; attempts up to and through the American War of Independence to get the House to grant American independence, and his attempt to impeach Warren Hastings, Director of the East India Company, for British atrocities in India. So in speeches before Parliament Burke accused Hastings and his agents of showing ‘the avarice of English dominion’ with an ‘unbounded license to plunder’. Burke complained that they built no schools, no hospitals, no bridges, but were merely out for ‘profit’ and ‘the transmission of great wealth to this country’.⁶⁰ On Britain’s responsibilities in America, India and Ireland, Burke is a more nuanced figure than in his pontifications on France – for which he is best known – where his genuinely interesting critique of the Revolution is at times alarmingly and gratuitously tied up with a romantic, chivalrously blinkered, and almost nauseating defence of the *ancien régime*.

Another clear indication of Burke’s political liberalism is his attitude to religion. The state must be silent about religious truth, not because there is none, but because it is hard to discern, and the attempt to impose upon others leads to conflict and oppression. So we have the characteristic liberal call to religious tolerance, based first of all upon a sense of a lack of certainty in religious matters, but then justified in terms of the Christian virtue of charity: ‘Perhaps [religious] truth may be far better [than social peace]. But as we have scarcely ever the same certainty in the one that we have in the other, I would, unless the truth were evident indeed, hold fast to peace, which has in her company charity, the highest of virtues.’⁶¹ Burke is explicit that authority derives from consent, expressed over time

⁵⁹ Burke, ‘Appeal’, p. 422.

⁶⁰ Edmund Burke, ‘Speech on the Impeachment of Warren Hastings’ (3rd Day, 18 February 1788), in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: Bohn Standard Library, 1877–84), Vol. 7, pp. 43–5.

⁶¹ Edmund Burke, ‘A Letter on the Affairs of Ireland, written in the year 1797’, in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. vi, pp. 75–6.

within a mixed constitution. A certain amount of relearning of the 'conservative' Burke might be required to see this point. Burke does not believe in democratic elections as the effective mechanism for representing the people and protecting their ancient liberties (the purpose of government, in Burke's view). He believes, as we may not, in custom, tradition, history and the common law, and in the representation of the people in a largely undemocratic mixed constitution. But the crucial liberal point is that authority is derived by popular consent, and is ordered towards the preservation of the subject's life, liberty and property. How that consent is registered is another matter; elective democratic representation is not necessary to political liberalism. Rather democratic representation through elections is thought by some to be the only effective guarantor of liberalism, or to be a legitimate expression of it; by others, such as Burke, democratic representation through polling is conceived to be a dangerous threat to political liberalism.

The greatest danger to the liberties of individuals is arbitrary rule, the overpowering of rational government. Burke considers that democracy is a great danger to liberalism – indeed 'the most false, wicked, and mischievous doctrine that ever could be preached to [the people]' – because it fosters and nourishes a desire for arbitrary power:

... arbitrary power is so much to the depraved taste of the vulgar, of the vulgar of every description, that almost all the dissensions, which lacerate the commonwealth, are not concerning the manner in which it is to be exercised, but concerning the hands in which it is to be placed. Somewhere they are resolved to have it. Whether they desire it to be vested in the many or the few, depends with most men upon the chance which they imagine they themselves may have or partaking in the exercise of that arbitrary sway, in the one mode or in the other.⁶²

The broader lesson to be learnt from Burke's anti-democratic stance is that attitudes to representative mechanisms of democracy are no litmus test for a thinker's political liberalism, especially where there is a concern about the frailty and fallenness of individuals, and the potential tyranny of majorities over the liberties of individuals (the great liberal passion).

⁶² Burke, 'Appeal', p. 459.

This passion comes to the fore where Burke expresses his concern about the ambitions of the post-revolutionary French state:

Individuality is left out of their scheme of Government. The state is all in all. Everything is referred to the production of force; afterwards everything is entrusted to the use of it. It is military in its principle, in its maxims, in its spirit, and in all its movements. The state has dominion and conquest for its sole object; dominion over minds by proselytism, over bodies by arms.⁶³

This violates the principle that the state 'has been made to the people, not the people conformed to the state'. Not only should the state seek 'every sort of social advantage', but it should also cultivate 'the welfare of every individual'. Countries that value liberty are such that 'the objects (the ends) which they embrace are of the greatest possible variety, and have become in a manner infinite'. This means necessarily that no one plan or end will be pursued, for the ends of individuals are various and not to be lightly trampled upon. Burke fears the way in which the French state is 'considered as a great machine' which operates 'for some one great end'. Burke is more comfortable with the British state, because in his view it 'pursues the greatest variety of ends, and is the least disposed to sacrifice any one of them to another, or to the whole':

It aims at taking in the entire circle of human desires. and securing for them their fair enjoyment. Our legislature has been ever closely connected, in its most efficient part, with individual feeling, and individual interest. Personal liberty, the most lively of these feelings and the most important of these interests, which in other European countries has rather arisen from the system of manners and the habitudes of life, than from the laws of the state, (in which it flourished more from neglect than attention) in England, has been a direct object of government.⁶⁴

Whatever we make of the comparative politics here, these comments underline the importance to Burke of the personal liberty of subjects to frame and pursue – without state interference – their own ends,

⁶³ Edmund Burke, 'Second Letter on a Regicide Peace', in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. v, p. 340.

⁶⁴ Burke, 'Second Letter', pp. 339–40.

various and incompatible as these may be. This must be one of the enduring pedal notes of all variations of political liberalism, and Burke's political thought at points resonates deeply with it.

A feature of Burke's thinking which might be thought to be in tension with other aspects of the liberal tradition is his hostility to calls for equality, compounded by his troublesome and at times effusive affection for aristocracy. The liberal tradition is usually committed to some notion of the equality of citizens. There can be no doubt that aspects of Burke's thought are in tension with a more developed and egalitarian liberalism; Burke is a multi-valenced thinker who became important for traditions other than the liberal one that I am highlighting. Nonetheless, there is something which can be said to mitigate the 'offence' (in politically liberal terms) of Burke's apparent inegalitarianism.

Taking an unambiguously political liberal thinker such as John Rawls – whom I will discuss extensively in the next chapter – we find that he is able to endorse a 'complex egalitarianism' when unpacking what is involved in a society of 'free and equal citizens'. A complex egalitarianism does not call for a levelling of all resources, wealth and symbolic power. Rather the maxim is that inequalities are justified inasmuch as the least advantaged are better off with them than they would be without them. Although Rawls comments that contemporary American culture is a long way from being in such a position, some inequality is in principle acceptable, if it is to the 'greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society'.⁶⁵ Burke's position is in fact not so different, in that he certainly considers the least advantaged to be better off with the inequalities than without them. He makes a distinction between 'levelling' and 'equalizing', where the former is a blanket reduction of all to the same estate, and the latter is more like a just distribution of resources (material and symbolic) according to – as Burke sees it – merit, need (widely understood) and overall utility. Burke's conviction is that 'those who attempt to level, never equalize', for 'in all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be upper-most'.⁶⁶

Although we may not agree with Burke's view here, that he defends an unequal distribution of resources and power hardly dis-

⁶⁵ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 43.

⁶⁶ Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. IV, p. 190.

qualifies him from being a 'liberal'. Otherwise seminally liberal thinkers such as Locke and Hayek would be disqualified, supporting as they do unequal distribution of resources for a mixture of reasons to do with merit, need and overall utility. Burke's aversion to leveling programmes is made more comprehensible in the light of his attachment to 'order', and his wariness about the 'tricks and devices of human skill', both of which I will go on to discuss.

Even the impact of Burke's interest in the aristocracy can be mitigated by reflecting on the intentions behind both Burke's endorsement and Rawlsian 'complex egalitarianism'. The importance Burke places in aristocrats does not arise from any sense that the aristocrat is necessarily a more excellent human being (although he *should* have certain virtues attendant upon his birth and education, as each of the estates should), or deserves more protection under the law; Burke is not inequality in that sense. Rather, Burke considers that the historical institution of aristocracy is a vital protection of certain basic liberties of the subject. This argument was prevalent in an English republican tradition, with Milton praising 'those faithful and courageous barons' of the Middle Ages 'who lost their lives in the field, making glorious war against the tyrants for the common liberty'.⁶⁷ A similar expectation of the nobility was espoused after the Restoration by the republican writer Algernon Sidney who recalled the 'ancient', 'warlike', 'powerful, gallant nobility' who had spirits 'suitable to their births' and who had been able to protect the liberties of the subject, 'to restrain the exorbitances that either the king, or the commons might run into'.⁶⁸ Burke is less convinced about the personal merits of aristocrats, commenting that the House of Lords were 'in general, languid, scrupulous, and unsystematic', although 'on the whole' Burke inclines to the view that 'the faults in . . . [the Lords] . . . are no more than the ordinary frailties of human nature'.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, that the nobles had something of a protective national role for Burke is made clear, for instance, in a letter to the Duke of Richmond where he instructs his grace that 'you, if you are what you

⁶⁷ John Milton, *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. D. M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952–82), Vol. III, p. 343. My comments on the English republican tradition are indebted to Blair Worden's article 'English Republicanism' in J. H. Burns (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 443–75. For the discussion of Milton and Sidney see p. 459.

⁶⁸ Robert Molesworth, *An Account of Denmark* (London: 1694), p. 70.

⁶⁹ Edmund Burke, *Letter to the Duke of Richmond Nov 17 1772*, in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, p. 187.

ought to be, are the great oaks that shade a country and perpetuate your benefits from Generation to Generation'.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the aristocrat is often not what he ought to be, and Burke is frequently exhausted and exasperated by the behaviour of actual nobility. So in 1795 Burke complained of how the Duke of Bedford oppressed the industry of the 'common man', by which Burke meant himself, being as he was of fairly humble origins: 'The Duke of Bedford is the leviathan among all the creatures of the crown. He tumbles about his unwieldy bulk, he plays and frolics in the ocean of royal bounty. Huge as he is . . . he is still a creature.'⁷¹ Burke goes on to describe his grace's 'ribs, his fins, his whale bone, his blubber, the very spiracles through which he spouts a torrent of brine against his origin, and covers me all over with the spray'.⁷²

So Burke's affection for aristocracy is not straightforward. He tends to demand from aristocrats the stability and protections we would expect from more democratic institutions. The difference between a thinker like Burke and John Rawls is less a substantial one concerning the intrinsic excellence of persons, leading to a different standing before the law; the concern is more how best to preserve (as we would understand them) liberal protections. For Rawls, inequalities are justified if under them the least advantaged are still better off than they would be with greater equality; this, however erroneous, would be the grounds of Burke's defence of aristocracy.

Lord Acton, the nineteenth-century liberal, was so explicitly concerned with the theological basis of his political liberalism, that he proclaimed to have 'renounced everything in Catholicism which was not compatible with Liberty, and everything in Politics which was not compatible with Catholicity'.⁷³ Although Acton conceded that 'liberty' was 'an idea of which there are two hundred definitions',⁷⁴ it was recognizable most of all by the absence of arbitrary rule and the protection of the liberties of individuals: 'you will know it by outward signs: Representation, the extinction of slavery . . . and the like;

⁷⁰ Burke, 'Richmond', p. 190.

⁷¹ Edmund Burke, 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. V, pp. 215-50.

⁷² Burke, 'Letter', pp. 215-50.

⁷³ Lord Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston, Mass.: The Beacon Press, 1948), p. lvi.

⁷⁴ From his Inaugural Lecture delivered at Cambridge, 11 June 1895, reprinted in *Lectures on Modern History* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1906), pp. 12-13.

better still by less apparent evidences: the security of the weaker groups and the liberty of conscience, which, effectually secured, secures the rest'.⁷⁵ Acton was convinced that 'politics is an affair of principle, that it is an affair of morality, that it touches eternal interests as much as vices and virtues do in public life'.⁷⁶ Concerning Burke, Acton wrote to Gladstone 'some day, I shall say to a pupil: Read Burke night and day. He is our best political writer, and the deepest of all Whigs'.⁷⁷ No one could deny the 'liberal' credentials of Acton and Gladstone (if they are not liberals, the category is an empty one); Acton's deep admiration of Burke, and his proclaiming Burke as 'the deepest of all Whigs', with Whiggery to an extent becoming nineteenth-century Gladstonian liberalism,⁷⁸ is perhaps a testimony to the possibilities of a liberal reading of Burke.

Acton, like Burke, had a theological appreciation of the need to protect individuals both because of the dignity of our freedom, and the wretchedness of our fallen condition: 'now as heretofore, the Men of the Time are, in most cases, unprincipled, and act from motives of interest, of passion, of prejudice cherished and unchecked, of selfish hope or unworthy fear'.⁷⁹ This criticism is rooted explicitly in Acton's Christian beliefs:

The Christian is bound by his very creed to suspect evil, and cannot release himself . . . religion has brought evil to light in a way in which it never was before; it has shown its depth, subtlety, ubiquity; and a revelation, full of mercy on the one hand, is terrible in its exposure of the world's real state on the other. The Gospel fastens the sense of evil upon the mind; a Christian is enlightened, hardened, sharpened, as to evil; he sees it where others do not . . . He owns the doctrine of original sin; that doctrine puts him necessarily on his guard against all appearances,

⁷⁵ Acton, *Lectures*, pp. 12–13.

⁷⁶ *Letters of Lord Acton to Mary Gladstone*, ed. Herbert Paul (London and New York: Macmillan, 1904), p. 105.

⁷⁷ Scholarly integrity demands that I complete Acton's sentence: ' . . . and he (the student) will answer: Dear Me! I thought he broke up the party, carried it over to the Tories, admired the despotism of the Bourbons, and trained no end of men towards Conservatism? I shall have to answer: So he did. Both sayings are true.' In *Lord Acton and His Circle*, ed. G. Abbot (London and New York: Gasquet, 1906, p. 60).

⁷⁸ Which is not to under-emphasize the importance of other traditions that fed into Gladstonian liberalism, such as the Peelites and Radicals.

⁷⁹ *Letters to Mary Gladstone*, p. 228.

sustains his apprehension under perplexity, and prepares him for recognizing anywhere what he knows to be everywhere.⁸⁰

Here we have a liberal denying the supposedly 'liberal' conviction that evils can be eliminated by education, social programmes or better government. In Acton's famous dictums that 'progress is the religion of those who have none'⁸¹ and 'power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely',⁸² we have a sense that there is an irreducible wickedness in human nature, a general, basic and radical evil. Himmelfarb comments that this sense 'depended upon the paradoxical insight that men are sinful creatures, not to be confused with God, and that, created in the likeness of God, they have spiritual needs that no amount of material well-being can satisfy'.⁸³ As with Burke there is a sense that human nature is both created and fallen, and that liberal political institutions that protect the frail and dependent individual must contain this wickedness.

At the same time, Acton disagrees with Burke's prescription as to how these protections are to be maintained. Although both fear the tyranny of the majority, Acton's suspicion of human nature is more consistently applied across the board than Burke's, and lacks the latter's high expectations of aristocrats and the *ancien régime*. Consequently Acton supports the expansion of democracy in the form of the Reform Acts of the 1830s, commenting that 'the danger is not that a particular class is unfit to govern. Every class is unfit to govern'.⁸⁴ We would endorse Acton's censure of Burke, and the recognition of the vital role of democracy as one of the protections of liberal democracy within a mixed constitution.

Leo Strauss: order and nature

Leo Strauss tells a story about the demise of the notion of natural law in political philosophy. It is my conviction that Burke creates problems for this story, and that once the narrative framework has been pierced in one place, other fragments seem to fit the accepted picture less comfortably. The story Strauss tells goes something like this. In the eighteenth century modern natural science destroyed 'the

⁸⁰ Acton, 'Study of History', in *Essays*, p. 28.

⁸¹ Acton, *Essays*, p. xxxviii. Quoting from Add. MSS., 5648.

⁸² 'Acton-Creighton Correspondence' in Acton, *Essays*, p. 364.

⁸³ Acton, 'Introduction', *Essays*, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Acton, *Letters to Mary Gladstone*, p. 196.

teleological view of the universe, of which the teleological view of man forms a part'.⁸⁵ It was found to be unpalatable to follow up the non-teleological conception of the universe with a similarly non-teleological account of human life as 'it seemed to be impossible to give an adequate account of human ends by conceiving of them merely as posited by desires or impulses'.⁸⁶ The unstable solution found was 'to accept a fundamental, typically modern, dualism of a nonteleological natural science and a teleological science of man'.⁸⁷ An attempt was made to locate the difference between man and non-human nature in the dimension of history, 'history was thought to supply the only empirical, and hence the only solid, knowledge of what is truly human, of man as man: of his greatness and misery'.⁸⁸ At the same time, empirical historical study revealed a great diversity and plurality of forms of life, challenging the very notion that there is anything at all which constitutes man's nature, 'man as man'.⁸⁹ This presented a challenge to natural right doctrines, which 'claim that the fundamentals of justice are, in principle, accessible to man as man. They presuppose, therefore, that a most important truth can, in principle, be accessible to man as man'.⁹⁰ What started as an attempt to mark out the teleological nature of man within an historical dimension becomes a 'radical historicism' which 'asserts that the basic insight into the essential limitation of all human thought is not accessible to man as man, or that it is not the result of the progress of the labor of human thought, but that it is an unforeseeable gift of unfathomable fate'.⁹¹ 'Fate' stands for all the contingency of our thrownness in the world, rendering us incapable of speaking about any 'essential' nature, rather than our constructed social roles and identities. Radical historicism, coupled with the supposed impossibility of going from factual statements to value judgements, led to the demise of natural right doctrines, and the death of any notion of unconstructed, given order.

Ultimately responsible for this demise of the natural law tradition is the modern turn away from attending to eternal order, towards

⁸⁵ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 8.

⁸⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 8.

⁸⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 8.

⁸⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 17.

⁸⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 28.

⁹⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 28.

⁹¹ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 28.

attending to human construction. The account of how this happens given by Strauss is complex, and needs some unteasing. First of all, the difference between the modern and the pre-modern is distinctly *not*, for Strauss, that the moderns are sceptical about natural law, whereas the pre-moderns thought it possible to read the natural law, the purposes of creation from creation itself. Strauss insists that being bewildered by the 'variety of notions of right' and so moving towards the 'nonexistence of natural right' 'is as old as political philosophy itself'.⁹² Rather, the difference between classical and modern approaches for Strauss seems to be the following.

The classical approach

Even where there is not a sense of natural law, there is nevertheless a view that there is a natural and eternal order, not constructed by human convention. Because of the epistemological difficulty of reading this order, in human and political affairs it may be that we have little to go on except convention, an 'agreement which may produce peace' but 'not truth'.⁹³ The crucial difficulty here is epistemological. There is an eternal and natural order, which in principle could be known, but in practice this is so difficult that we must rely on convention, although 'nature is of incomparably higher dignity than convention of the fiat of society'.⁹⁴ Although convention can be given an important role, it is 'originally an inadequate attempt to answer the question of the all-comprehensive truth of the eternal order . . . The fundamental premise of conventionalism is, then, nothing other than the idea of philosophy as the attempt to grasp the eternal'.⁹⁵

The 'modern turn' and the modern denial of natural right takes the following form:

The modern approach

The difficulty with natural right – and its associated notions of order, law and harmony – for the modern approach is not epistemological but ontological. There is no sense that it is 'difficult' to discern order, in that there just is no natural and eternal order which it could be

⁹² Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 10.

⁹³ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 11.

⁹⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 11.

⁹⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 12.

difficult to read. So 'the adherents of the modern historical view . . . reject as mythical the premise that nature is the norm; they reject the premise that nature is of higher dignity than any works of man'.⁹⁶ This lends an importance to convention that was not there on the classical view. On the classical view, convention is in principle answerable to a non-constructed order; whereas on the modern view there is no ontological lever with which one can be sceptical about human conventions. Where grasping the eternal is in principle impossible (because of its completely noumenal status, or because everything is a human construction), the 'eternal' becomes in practice irrelevant. Where the classical approach sees 'philosophy as the attempt to grasp the eternal', 'the modern opponents of natural right reject precisely this idea. According to them, all human thought is historical and hence unable ever to grasp anything eternal.'⁹⁷ 'The contemporary rejection of natural right in the name of history is based', writes Strauss 'not on historical evidence, but on a philosophical critique of the possibility or knowability of natural right.'⁹⁸ This 'critique of the possibility or knowability' of natural right goes beyond the epistemological difficulties of the classical approach. Rather it asserts that it is in principle impossible to know, just because there is nothing to know.

Some attention to crucial passages in Burke reveal that he fits Strauss's 'classical' model much more closely than the 'modern'. Burke it seems, and Burkean liberalism, is on the wrong side of the modern turn. And if Burkean liberalism is, what else might be? The 'modern turn' has something of the status of a Kuhnian paradigm. A certain amount of marginal counter evidence can be accommodated, and the paradigm can remain because of its overall utility and persuasiveness. But if the evidence against the paradigm is too great, then it can be toppled. Then fragmented pieces, which previously might have been easily ignored, can begin to assume their own pattern and centrality. There is, of course, no intention to replace one monolithic impression of liberalism with another one, and there are features of liberalism that the 'modern turn' explains well, just as there were features of the universe explained well by the Ptolemaic world-view.

The Straussian paradigm begins to be stretched, then, when we

⁹⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 11.

⁹⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 12.

⁹⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 12.

hear Burke proclaim that 'I love order . . . for the universe is order'.⁹⁹ God is 'the awful Author of our being' and 'the Author of our place in the order of existence'. Burke finds that order is 'made to us, and we are made to it'. We are all bound by the law that God has prescribed for us. This 'great immutable, pre-existent law' connects us with the 'eternal frame of the universe'.¹⁰⁰ This eternal law gives our conventions 'all the force and sanction they can have'.¹⁰¹ It simply cannot be said that Burke has no sense of the answerability of human convention to the 'eternal law' when we hear him say such things as 'each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place'.¹⁰² The different contracts made by political societies are as 'municipal corporations' of a 'universal kingdom'. There is certainly none of the 'liberal' or 'modern' confidence in human ability to freely construct order and meaning when Burke tells us that these 'municipal corporations' are 'not morally at liberty at their pleasure, and on their speculations of a contingent improvement, wholly to separate and tear asunder the bands of their subordinate community, and to dissolve it into an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles'.¹⁰³

For Burke there is an eternal order – it is hard to read, but human convention is answerable to it. This is essentially the 'classical' point of view on Strauss's scheme. There is in political and moral matters 'a necessity that is not chosen, but chooses, a necessity paramount to deliberation, that admits no discussion, and demands no evidence'.¹⁰⁴ Burke considers political society to be ordered, by the consent of the people, for the preservation of the liberty of individuals. At the same time he has a powerful sense of our thrownness, the contingency and createdness of the human condition, 'this necessity . . . is part . . . of that moral and physical disposition of things, to

⁹⁹ Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (Chicago and Cambridge University Presses, 1958–70), Vol. vi, p. 460.

¹⁰⁰ Burke, *Correspondence*, Vol. vi, p. 75.

¹⁰¹ Burke, *Correspondence*, Vol. vi, p. 75.

¹⁰² Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. iv, p. 230.

¹⁰³ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 230.

¹⁰⁴ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 230.

which man must be obedient by consent of force'.¹⁰⁵ When human hubris leads man to break away from his createdness – as Burke understands it – and to treat the eternal law as an 'object of choice' then 'the law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow'.¹⁰⁶

Now it is true that Burke places a high importance on convention, custom, prescription and artifice in political affairs. This in no way contradicts his reverence for the natural order; rather it is an intense expression of it. The human mind and human reason are part of the natural order, and nature – richly understood as a continuity running through all of creation – commands that we obey convention, custom and prescription. So Burke tells us that 'in all things whatever, the mind is the most valuable and the most important'.¹⁰⁷ We then have a classically Aristotelian expression of reason as the informing principle, just as 'the beast is an informing principle to the plough and cart, the labourer is as reason to the beast; and the farmer is as a thinking and presiding principle to the labourer'.¹⁰⁸ In a crucial passage linking Burke's understanding of artificiality and 'natural law', we see that there is no tension between the two, just because art is 'man's nature':

The state of civil society . . . is a state of nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life. For man is by nature reasonable; and he is never perfectly in his natural state, but when he is placed where reason may be best cultivated, and most predominates. Art is man's nature. We are as much, at least, in a state of nature in formed manhood, as in immature and helpless infancy. Men, qualified in the manner I have just described, form in nature, as she operates in the common modification of society, the leading, guiding and governing part. It is the soul to the body, without which the man does not exist. To give therefore no more

¹⁰⁵ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 230.

¹⁰⁶ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 230.

¹⁰⁷ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 230.

¹⁰⁸ Burke, 'Thoughts and Details on Scarcity', in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. v, p. 193.

importance, in the social order, to such descriptions of men, than that of so many units, is a horrible usurpation.¹⁰⁹

So there is a natural law basis to Burke's doctrine of prescription, convention and tradition. Remember that this natural law connects us ultimately to the eternal created order, and so is answerable to that. There is a high importance for convention in Burke, but again, it resembles more the classical view, where the natural order is something apart from and prior to the human, but in which the human participates by virtue of our rational nature. Where there is a difficulty in talking of the natural law – again as with Strauss's classical view – it is in terms of the epistemological difficulty of knowing what it is, given our 'fallible and feeble' natures. Hence, for Burke, the need for institutions and traditions rich in memory and experience:

Through the same plan of a conformity to nature in our artificial institutions, and by calling in the aid of her unerring and powerful instincts, to fortify the fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason, we have derived several other, and those no small benefits, from considering our liberties in the light of an inheritance.¹¹⁰

Burke combines an orientation to the eternal divine law with an endorsement of the local particularity of different forms of government and convention, depending upon the customs and history of various societies. This way of conceiving the relationship between local particularity and divine law is not evidence of a 'modern' constructivism or a creeping relativism, but goes back to a distinction drawn by Augustine between the eternal and temporal law. In *De libero arbitrio* Augustine gives an example of a law which deserves to be called 'eternal':

... consider the law that is called the highest reason, which must always be obeyed, and by which the wicked deserve misery and the good deserve a happy life and by which the law that we agreed to call 'temporal' is rightly enacted and rightly changed. Can anyone of sense deny that this law is unchangeable and eternal?¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Burke, 'Appeal', p. 467.

¹¹⁰ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 178.

¹¹¹ The translation used is by T. Williams, Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), Bk 1.6,

As human beings are 'changeable and subject to time',¹¹² there must also be temporal law 'promulgated in writing helpful to human beings living in this present life'.¹¹³ This law is 'temporal', for 'although it is just, it can justly be changed in the course of time'.¹¹⁴ These temporal laws, although changeable over time, and variable from people to people, nonetheless gain whatever validity they do from their service to the eternal law. The eternal law that 'is stamped upon our minds is the law according to which it is just that all things be perfectly ordered' and is that 'by which all temporal laws regarding human government can be changed'.¹¹⁵ Burke is a perfect Augustinian when writing, as quoted above, that 'each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place'.¹¹⁶

The final nail in the coffin of any attempt to place Burke in the modern 'historical' camp must be his strictures against the importance of the historical dimension. Burke is strong on time, and the frailties and contingencies which belong to our temporal nature, but there is not in Burke any sense that 'history' yields the key to man's unique nature, nor that in any sense it is a progressive or dynamic concept. The crucial category for Burke is constantly temporal nature, rather than a dynamic historical progress or awareness. So

p. 11. The original text is as follows: '. . . illa lex quae summa ratio nominatur, cui semper obtemperandum est et per quam mali miseram, boni beatam uitam merentur, per quam denique illa, quam temporalem uocandam diximus, recte fertur recteque mutatur, potestne cuiquam intellegenti non incommutabilis aeternaque uideri?', *De Libero Arbitrio*, Bk I.6, p. 220, in *Aurelii Augustini Opera, Pars 1:2: Contra Academicos in Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 29 (Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1970).

¹¹² Augustine, *Free Choice*, p. 10. '... Mutabiles temporibusque subjecti . . .', *De Libero Arbitrio*, p. 219.

¹¹³ Augustine, *Free Choice*, p. 10. '... Utrum lex quae litteris promulgator hominibus hanc uitam uiuentibus opituletor', *De Libero Arbitrio*, p. 220.

¹¹⁴ Augustine, *Free Choice*, p. 11. 'Appellemus ergo istam legem . . . temporalem quae quamquam iusta sit, commutari tamen per tempora iuste potest', *De Libero Arbitrio*, p. 220.

¹¹⁵ Augustine, *Free Choice*, p. 11. 'Cum ergo sit una lex, ex qua illae omnes temporales ad homines regendos uariantur, num ideo ipsa uariari ullo modo potest?', *De Libero Arbitrio*, p. 220.

¹¹⁶ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 230.

after reaffirming again that 'our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts wherein', Burke informs us that:

. . . the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete. By adhering in this manner and on those principles to our forefathers, we are guided not by the superstition of antiquarians, but by the spirit of philosophic analogy.¹¹⁷

This passage also explodes the consensus that liberalism is necessarily attached to at least a broad sense of progress; there could be no more perfect expression of the classical Augustinian view of history than Burke's invocation of the 'varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression'.¹¹⁸

Where there is a difference between Burke and the classical tradition, it lies in the enormous emphasis Burke can put on the individual and the liberties of the individual. Strauss correctly picks up on this, but goes on to draw the wrong implication when he comments that for Burke, 'naturalness and free flowering of individuality are the same',¹¹⁹ as if Burke is somehow taken in by the 'modern turn' and announces that order and meaning arise from the free construction and expression of individuals. Burke emphasizes the individual not because of the individual's potency and creative constructive abilities, but precisely because of the individual's created, fallen, thrown, frail and complex condition. The protection of individuals needs to be the lynch-pin of political liberalism, just because individuals, taken singly or collectively, are dangerous and fallen. There is such a thing as human wisdom, but it is so obscured and delicate, that it needs to be read off generations, rather than individuals or committees.

¹¹⁷ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 178.

¹¹⁸ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 178.

¹¹⁹ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 178.

So the difference between Burke and the 'classical view' as outlined by Strauss is not at all that Burke thinks that there is no eternal order, or that we construct such order that there is, but rather that Burkean liberalism elaborates on a *classical* theme – the epistemological difficulty of reading this order – and adds a theological richness to this in terms of his compassionate sense of human fallenness. There is a greater emphasis on the individual in Burkean liberalism than in Straussian classicism, but this is due to an even more pronounced sense of our created, fallen and thrown condition, answerable to the eternal order which it sees but through a glass darkly. It is certainly not ascribable to the modern disease of believing that individual expressivity, creativity and construction is salvific in itself.

Burke and the politics of fallenness

The third phase of the discussion shows how Burke has a profound and compassionate sense of human imperfectibility, frailty and complexity, which gives his political thought an allergy to abstraction, metaphysical generalization, extremism and progressivism. We will see how this sense of human imperfectibility is a generating motivation for Burke's liberalism and individualism; although there is order and harmony, it is hard – but not impossible – to read it, owing to the obscured quality of the order.

Burke's view is that a tendency towards oversimplistic extremism, generalization and metaphysical abstractions arises from failing to reckon with our complexity, fallenness and fallibility – very similar, as we will see, to the anxieties expressed by Hooker in relation to Puritanism. Failing to account for 'the concerns, the actions' and 'the passions' of men leads thinkers to attempt to treat social knowledge as a species of technical or scientific knowledge, exactly the tendency in 'liberalism' identified by theologians in the wake of Heidegger:

These philosophers consider men in their experiments, not more than they do mice in an air pump, or in a recipient of mephitic gas . . . It is remarkable, that, in a great arrangement of mankind, not one reference whatsoever is to be found to anything moral or anything politic; nothing that relates to the concerns, the actions, the passions, the interests of men.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Burke, 'Letter to a Noble Lord', p. 246.

The need for caution in politics is brought about because of our frail and complex condition. Burke is subtle here, both celebrating our createdness, and lamenting our fallen frailty. So, on the one hand, we find Burke discouraging a lament at the created human condition, stating that 'he censures God who quarrels with the imperfections of man':¹²¹ 'There is no part of our condition, but we ought to submit to with cheerfulness. Why should I desire to be more than man? I have too much reverence for our nature to wish myself divested even of the weak parts of it.'¹²² On the other hand the invocation to 'submit . . . with cheerfulness' has to be read against Burke's cautionary stricture that 'the natural progress of the passions, from frailty to vice, ought to be prevented by a watchful eye and a firm hand'.¹²³ In history 'a great volume is unrolled for our instruction' consisting 'for the greater part' of humanity's slippage from frailty to vice, of the 'miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites, which shake the public with the same'.¹²⁴ This is not so different from Richard Hooker's observation that faults that arise 'from the root of human frailty and corruption . . . not only are, but have been always more or less, yea . . . will be till the world's end complained of'.¹²⁵ Human nature is imperfect; therefore we should be practical, realistic and compassionate, rather than full of righteousness, pride, extreme idealism or indignation. But there is something from which we have fallen, something we should have been, a moral order exemplifying goodness, beauty and harmony, and we should still orientate ourselves as much as possible to this order.

So Burke sees the need for the irreducible wickedness of the human condition to be contained within stable structures, rather than attempting to eliminate it through radical measures, for

you would not cure the evil by resolving, that there should be no more monarchs, nor ministers of state, nor of the Gospel; no interpreters of law; no general officers; no public councils. You

¹²¹ H. V. F. Somerset (ed.), *A Notebook of Edmund Burke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 92.

¹²² Burke, 'Speech at Bristol, previous to the Election, 1780', in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. III, p. 411.

¹²³ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 269.

¹²⁴ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 267.

¹²⁵ Richard Hooker, 'Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity', preface, ch. III. 7, p. 147.

might change the names. The things in some shape must remain. A certain *quantum* of power must always exist in the community, in some hands, and under some appellation. Wise men will apply their remedies to vices, not to occasional organs by which they act, and the transitory modes in which they appear. Otherwise you will be wise historically, a fool in practice.¹²⁶

If one reacts only to the 'transitory organ' by which 'vice' acts, one will fall foul of the fact that

seldom have two ages the same fashion in their pretexts and the same modes of mischief. Wickedness is a little more inventive. Whilst you are discussing fashion, the fashion is gone by. The very same vice assumes a new body . . . You are terrifying yourselves with ghosts and apparitions, whilst your house is a haunt of robbers. It is thus with all those, who, attending only to the shell and husk of history, think they are waging war with intolerance, pride and cruelty, whilst, under colour of abhorring the ill principles of antiquated parties, they are authorizing and feeding the same odious vices in different factions, and perhaps in worse.¹²⁷

The political implications of Burke's understanding of human weakness contained within a moral framework are well understood by the commentator Michael Freeman:

Men who hate vice too much, says Burke, love men too little. Men of excessive virtue may take excessive measures to bring ordinary men into the path of virtue. In the womb of moral puritanism lies the seed of political authoritarianism. Fanaticism, even if altruistic, perhaps especially when altruistic, poses a greater threat to freedom and humanity than ordinary selfishness. Paradoxically, extreme virtue turns into extreme vice.¹²⁸

Anticipating the Manichaean tendencies of crusading liberalism, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, it is interesting to find Freeman using a similar vocabulary for Burke's critique: 'Burke . . . accused

¹²⁶ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 267.

¹²⁷ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 267.

¹²⁸ Michael Freeman, *Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 41.

revolutionaries of Manichaeism, the belief that the world is divided between the forces of Good and Evil'.¹²⁹

The spirit of loving reformation

A sense of human frailty does not lead into a moral or political nihilism, but rather lends itself naturally to a reforming nature, but reform enacted out of a sense of caution about oneself, compassion for others and a sense of the frailty and limitations of human agency. Burke cautions against a 'mode of arguing from your having done *any* thing in a certain line, to the necessity of doing *every* thing'. Such an approach 'has political consequences of other moment than those of a logical fallacy'.¹³⁰

In his efforts for reform Burke aims to act towards the constitution – 'no simple, no superficial thing, nor to be estimated by superficial understandings'¹³¹ – on the analogy of a 'friend with frailties':¹³²

I think it a duty, in that case, not to inflame the public mind against the obnoxious person, by any exaggeration of his faults. It is our duty rather to palliate his errors and defects, or to cast them into the shade, and industriously to bring forward any good qualities that he may happen to possess.¹³³

So, contrary to what is sometimes thought, Burke did not think the British constitution was perfect; it had, he acknowledged, obnoxious elements and faults. Taking the friend analogy further, Burke gives us an account of what the 'spirit of reformation' consists in:

... it then becomes the office of a friend to urge his faults and vices with all the energy of enlightened affection, to paint them in their most vivid colours, and to bring the moral patient to a better habit. Thus I think with regard to individuals; thus I think with regard to ancient and respected governments and orders of men. A spirit of reformation is never more consistent with itself, than when it refuses to be rendered the means of destruction.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Freeman, *Burke*, p. 51.

¹³⁰ Burke, 'Appeal', p. 422.

¹³¹ Burke, 'Appeal', p. 487.

¹³² Burke, 'Appeal', p. 426.

¹³³ Burke, 'Appeal', p. 426.

¹³⁴ Burke, 'Appeal', p. 426.

Destruction, Burke considers, is the likely result when we turn our hand to the transforming – the ‘demolition and construction’ – of human nature. Here we have a fine statement of the danger of constructionism and the view that the subject can construct itself and society:

If circumspection and caution are a part of wisdom, when we work only upon inanimate matter, surely they become a part of duty too, when the subject of our demolition and construction is not brick and timber, but sentient beings, by the sudden alteration of whose state, condition, and habits, multitudes may be rendered miserable.¹³⁵

The spirit of loving reformation, which refuses to be ‘the means of destruction’ is the only approach which recognizes that ‘the nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man’s nature, or to the quality of his affairs’.¹³⁶ So from considerations to do with human createdness within a moral order, and fallenness from this order, we derive a warning concerning political simplifications and metaphysical generalization, for ‘circumstances are infinite, and infinitely combined’, they are ‘are variable and transient’ and ‘he, who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous, but stark mad . . . A statesman, never losing sight of principles, is to be guided by circumstances; and judging contrary to the exigencies of the moment he may ruin his country for ever.’¹³⁷ In this last sentence we have the createdness and fallenness perfectly poised: the statesman must never lose ‘sight of principles’, the eternal moral order, but must also be ‘guided by circumstances . . . the exigencies of the moment’.

Contrary to the spirit of loving reformation within a framework of obscured order, is a simplistic and metaphysically abstract way of proceeding, such as Burke considered to be at work in the French Revolution. In a sentiment reminiscent of Hooker’s warning, which we will come to in the next chapter, against the Puritans who

¹³⁵ Burke, ‘A Letter from Mr. Burke to the Sheriffs of Bristol, on the Affairs of America’, in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. III, p. 322.

¹³⁶ Burke, ‘Reflections’, p. 201.

¹³⁷ Burke, ‘Letters on a Regicide Peace’, in *Works and Correspondence*, Vol. V, p. 307.

'endeavour to purge the earth of all manner of evil',¹³⁸ Burke complains about the 'clumsy subtlety' of the revolutionaries' 'political metaphysics',¹³⁹ warning of the way in which it can 'sweep the earth with their hurricane, and . . . break up the fountains of the great deep to overwhelm us'.¹⁴⁰ Simplistic abstractions and universal political norms cannot be framed, not because there is no moral order, but because 'the lines of morality are not like ideal lines of mathematics':

It is not worth our while to discuss, like sophisters, whether, in no case, some evil, for the sake of some benefit, is to be tolerated. Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral, or any political subject. Pure metaphysical abstraction does not belong to these matters. The lines of morality are not like ideal lines of mathematics. They are broad and deep as well as long. They admit of exceptions; they demand modifications. These exceptions and modifications are not made by the process of logic, but by the rules of prudence. Prudence is not only the first in rank of the virtues political and moral, but she is the director, the regulator, the standard of them all. Metaphysics cannot live without definition; but prudence is cautious how she defines.¹⁴¹

As we saw above in Burke's attitude to the 'rebellious' Lord North, we cannot even state universally and in all instances that revolutions are illegitimate. There is just a cautious presumption against them on the basis of a 'parsimony' when it comes to the 'voluntary production of evil':

Without attempting therefore to define, what never can be defined, the case of a revolution in government, this, I think, may be safely affirmed, that a sore and pressing evil is to be removed, and that a good, great in its amount, and unequivocal in its nature, must be probable almost to certainty, before the inestimable price of our own morals, and the well-being of a number of our fellow-citizens, is paid for a revolution. If ever we ought to be economists even to parsimony, it is in the voluntary production of evil. Every revolution contains in it something of evil.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, preface, Ch. VIII. 6, p. 41.

¹³⁹ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 198.

¹⁴⁰ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 198.

¹⁴¹ Burke, 'Appeal', p. 407.

¹⁴² Burke, 'Appeal', p. 407.

This degree of certainty before radical action is required, for the reason that 'very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions. In states there are often some obscure and almost latent causes, things which appear at first view of little moment, on which a very great part of its prosperity or adversity may most essentially depend.'¹⁴³ There is a tendency with extreme action to resemble the man 'that sets his house on fire because his fingers are frost-bitten'; such a man, Burke comments, 'can never be a fit instructor in the method of providing our habitations with a cheerful and salutary warmth'.¹⁴⁴

The problem with 'rights' language – as invoked, for instance, in the French Revolution – is not so much that there is an appeal to nature, or natural purposes and order, but that the appeal is too simplistic, overlooking the way in which 'nature' when it reaches the heights of humanity, is complex, artificial (remember 'art is man's nature') and diverse:

These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are, by the laws of nature, refracted from their straight line. Indeed, in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns, the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections, that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction.¹⁴⁵

Burke's political instincts are constantly informed by his sense of the frailty and complexity of the human condition, leading to vigilance, caution, self-interrogation and discerning reform: '... the nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity: and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature, or to the quality of his affairs'.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

In certain specifiable respects, Burke is unequivocally a liberal. Political society is ordered towards the protection of the liberties of

¹⁴³ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 200.

¹⁴⁴ Burke, 'Appeal', p. 487.

¹⁴⁵ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 201.

¹⁴⁶ Burke, 'Reflections', p. 201.

individuals; authority is derived by the consent of the people within a mixed constitution, and the state must be tolerant of religious diversity, favouring peace over truth. At the same time, the motivating force for his liberal individualism within a mixed constitution is his theological anthropology of the human being as constructed, created, thrown, contingent and fallen. In a more contemporary idiom we might comment that Burke is aware of the subject not as the transcendent source of its own identity and value, but as a site for a complex interweaving of discourses, social, historical and political, which constitute the subject. He is individualistic not because he thinks the individual is self-contained or the ultimate ontological unit. It is *because* the individual is so powerless in the face of her construction amidst a range of discourses over which she has no control, that the political subject must be protected – as much as possible – from the violence and intrusion of other subjects *qua* their life together in the polis.

So, to move back into a theological idiom, we find that Burke exemplifies exactly the sort of ‘faith in creation’ which O’Donovan can find missing in liberal ‘voluntarism’:

Faith in creation means accepting the world downstream of the Arbitrary Original, justified to us in being, goodness and order. Voluntarism, on the other hand, situates the agent at the source; it offers mystical access to the moment of origination, and leads the spirit to the rapture of pure terror before the arbitrariness of its own choice.¹⁴⁷

Burke speaks of created ‘reason, and order, and peace’¹⁴⁸ and ‘a necessity that is not chosen, but chooses’,¹⁴⁹ combining this with his abhorrence ‘since the first dawn of my understanding to this its obscure twilight’ of ‘all the operations of opinion, fancy, inclination, and will, in the affairs of government’.¹⁵⁰ We could not have a more compelling flesh-and-blood proof of the compatibility, even the binding conceptual momentum, which runs between a strand of political liberalism and a theological critique of voluntarism, constructivism and progressivism.

¹⁴⁷ O’Donovan, *Desire*, p. 274.

¹⁴⁸ Burke, ‘Reflections’, p. 230.

¹⁴⁹ Burke, ‘Reflections’, p. 230.

¹⁵⁰ Burke, ‘Letter to a Noble Lord’, p. 225.